



University
of Glasgow

Where next for Scottish Education:

Learning is Scotland's Future?

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Christopher Chapman and Graham Donaldson

**WORLD
CHANGING
GLASGOW**



Preface

As academics working in issues of educational change, improvement and innovation across the globe, combined with a strong commitment to improving Scottish education, we have become increasingly convinced that there is an urgent need for radical thinking about how best to support all of Scotland’s young people to learn and flourish in an increasingly challenging environment. It is in this spirit that we offer this paper to contribute to the National Discussion about the future of Scottish education.

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Introduction

Scottish education serves many young people well. Indeed, Scotland is one of the most educated societies in the world. However, combatting the impact of disadvantage on learning and wellbeing remains one of the main challenges facing future policy and practice. While the case for change rests partly on fixing such apparently entrenched problems, we must also create the conditions for future and sustained success. Improving the Scottish education system has been a priority for successive Scottish governments and over recent decades a series of ambitious reforms have been attempted. Most recently, announcements about further, possibly far-reaching, changes are awaited. Put simply, the Scottish educational system is at a crossroads. There are many strengths upon which to build but we need to be creative and up our game if today’s young people are to thrive in an increasingly complex and challenging world.

Education systems are complex, messy, and often inflexible. They are composed of a diverse range of stakeholders including learners, parents, the profession, business, and local and national government. Of all public services, it has been claimed that education systems are the toughest to reform. This situation is likely to be compounded by the current context. The severe and wide-ranging impacts of the pandemic are becoming clearer. There are climate and geo-political uncertainties, a related cost-of-living crisis, and the prospect of medium to long-term financial austerity. At the same time technological innovation is moving at an unprecedented pace, posing fresh challenges, and opening opportunities for new approaches to learning and teaching.



Our analysis, and that by outsiders like the OECD¹, suggests that establishing a common sense of purpose, building a coherent strategic direction, investing in teachers, harnessing technology and creating supportive structures are crucial for improved performance and sustained success. International evidence also suggests that centrally managed, top-down approaches to change tend to limit, and in some cases inhibit progress. Furthermore, the distance between central policy and action in the field has been exacerbated by uncertainty and lockdowns during the pandemic. A willingness to do things differently is not just an opportunity but a necessity if our young people are to gain the highest quality education that they both need and deserve.

¹Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development



What are schools for?

Around the turn of the century, Scotland was one of several countries that engaged in radical thinking about the purpose of schools and adopted a new way of describing the curriculum. CfE² took a much broader view of the curriculum, moving from general descriptions of the learning to be covered to an explicit emphasis on developing capacities associated with successful learning and healthy living. Knowledge remained central but the capacity to apply learning, to be creative and to engage critically with social and economic issues were also brought to the fore.

CfE reimagined the purpose of schooling and was widely supported both professionally and politically. It also envisaged a much more active role for schools and teachers in applying the curriculum to

the real world. The extent of prescription was significantly reduced, allowing learning and teaching to be much more locally determined and owned.

As is the case with much of educational reform, the period following the original design saw a gradual dilution of the original intent. In particular, the associated reform of secondary qualifications at age 16 seems to have reaffirmed the centrality of examinations in the work of secondary schools. The intended coherence between the broad general education to age fifteen and subsequent qualifications was not sufficiently realised.

Experience of curriculum reform in Scotland highlights several issues that should guide thinking about where next for Scottish education:

1. It has become a truism to say that we are living through a period of exceptional change and that the scope and pace of change is unlikely to lessen in the future. How do we ensure that schools remain relevant as the world changes round them? The climate, geopolitical turmoil and the almost exponential impact of technology all have significant implications for how people will live their lives and earn a living. These disruptive forces will, in turn, have significant implications for what happens within schools. We no longer have the luxury of relying on centrally driven reform that takes too long to reach the classroom and rarely achieves its original intentions. The rapidly changing context requires responsiveness and flexibility. This means we must shift from reform being reactive and ‘done to’ schools to proactive approaches that engage schools in shaping reform much more directly. Debate about the curriculum should not be an add-on but integral to a culture of innovation. That does not mean constant change but requires a long-term vision for education that provides a sound reference point for responding to inevitable and as yet unknown pressures. The vision of CfE needs to be revisited and the future direction widely affirmed if it is to be the future lodestar for policy.

2. The rationale for reform needs not only to be sound but it needs to be understood and embraced by those who will make it a reality. That rationale also needs to be tested periodically, particularly in periods of rapid change such as we have today. The involvement of the various interests, not least teachers and learners, in the process of design and review is essential. The recommendation in the Muir Review relating to the establishment of a new body to replace Education Scotland points directly to this requirement. Any new body should have a Council with broad representation and have a chair who is independent of government. Its functions should include curriculum review as well as facilitating and brokering local developments. We need a new focus which should signal a shift away from an over reliance on centralised, top-down improvement. This issue of real subsidiarity will be explored further later in this paper.

3. Less central prescription of the curriculum has significant implications for the work of schools and teachers and of local authorities. Local networks that build capacity and provide

sources of ideas and assistance can provide a rich context for high quality learning and teaching. Teachers’ time is a key variable and productivity should not simply mean maximising time in front of a class. The quality of learning is directly related to the capacity of teachers to plan stimulating and challenging activities that allow each learner to progress in their learning at an appropriate pace. Put simply, the quality and success of the learning of children and young people is directly related to the professional learning of teachers.

4. The best leadership creates a culture of aspiration and creativity. Apart from the quality of teachers, leadership is the key variable in high quality education systems. Any lack of investment in enhancing leadership capacity represents a huge, missed opportunity in achieving success at any level. Senior and middle managers may see or be encouraged to see themselves as mainly having a delivery function, as opposed to exercising a central role in innovation and shaping the future. Building a collective culture with shared responsibility will help create a better relationship between innovation and practice and also mitigate the effects of any variability in leadership.

5. Scotland’s commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child reasserts the need to place the interests of young people at the heart of decision making. Article 29 says that: “education must develop every child’s personality, talents and abilities to the full. It must encourage the child’s respect for human rights, as well as respect for their parents, their own and other cultures, and the environment.” Any changes in approaches to policy and practice must take full account this commitment.

6. If we are to embrace change rather than react to events, we need to establish mechanisms that can anticipate and harness such developments. Universities can and should play a major role as part of an ‘innovation hub’ that researches the efficacy and impact of developments whilst also translating opportunities into practical ways of improving access to, and experience of high-quality learning across the system. For example, artificial intelligence and virtual reality will increasingly dominate all our lives and schools should be at the forefront of harnessing such developments for their learners.

²Curriculum for Excellence



Existing barriers to progress

The Robert Owen Centre’s *Manifesto for Scottish Education* (2021) set out the evidence from our programme of research and development that points to barriers that can limit progress of educational change and improvement in Scotland. These included:

National policies that unintentionally encourage schools to narrow educational experiences.

A focus on ways of improving a narrowly conceived range of outcomes, for example on ‘raising attainment’ has led to a tendency to narrow the curriculum and allocate teaching time to those areas of learning that are seen as being most important and most easily assessed. There is also strong evidence internationally that ‘high stakes’ accountability can encourage ‘gaming’ by schools whereby there is an undue focus on those young people just below the desired level in order to improve apparent success. Pupils can come to serve the school’s reputation rather than the schools serving the needs of every pupil. Our argument is that educational equity assumes that all learners have a right to a broad, challenging and stimulating

range of learning experiences, including the expressive arts, humanities, and physical exercise.

Administrative structures that limit the freedom of practitioners to experiment. Where there is a tradition of central direction, this seems to constrain decision-making amongst school leaders, particularly those who feel under pressure to adhere to national and locally imposed policies. Our experience leads us to favour the idea of subsidiarity, i.e. that which individuals can accomplish well by their own initiative and efforts should not be taken from them by a higher authority, except where there are clear concerns about shallow decision making or under performance. We need to achieve a better balance between the pursuit of a national strategy, creating a shared sense of purpose and supporting legitimate local decision making. These should not be mutually exclusive, rather they are a mutual imperative if the system is to raise its game.

Fragmentation within education systems that inhibits opportunities for sharing expertise. Internally, schools have traditionally been separated

into distinct units working in relative isolation. Teachers have had responsibility for a class or classes and worked largely on their own. Equally, until relatively recently between-school collaboration has been more the exception than the rule. However, the best examples in our studies were characterised by a consensus amongst adults within a school around values of respect for differences and a commitment to work together to offer all students access to rich learning opportunities. The implication is that senior staff must create a climate within which this takes place.

Cultures and structures that discourage the sharing of expertise. This is a particular feature of those countries where policies are informed by neo-liberal perspectives. In these contexts, there may be a reluctance to see other schools as partners that can be used to support development and act as a catalyst for change. The experiences we have documented in Scotland suggest that, while there are many good examples of collaboration, there can be a ‘hidden’ sense of competition compounded by the desire to hide

differences or ‘variations’ in performance, irrespective of their nature or source. There needs to be greater transparency about data that exists within the system so that the spotlight can be shone on where we can learn, and where we need to support and catalyse improvement based on the best available evidence.

Aspects of education policy in Scotland are designed to take account of these barriers but taken together, the policy landscape appears somewhat incoherent and fragmented. In drawing attention to both the direction of travel and the barriers to progress within Scottish education we seek to provide a basis for thinking about how we might move forward.

Over the past decade, through a variety of innovations, initiatives, and interventions there have been repeated calls for doing things differently and cultural change. The Muir review makes a further call for cultural change. We have a unique and possibly once in a lifetime opportunity to rethink why and how we do things in Scottish education.



Learning Scotland’s Future: what might be done?

We need to resolve some longstanding issues relating to the governance of Scottish education. The creation of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 brought central government closer to the delivery of services, not least education. Over time, in our view it has become clear that levels of decision making have become confused, and the politics of education has become sharper and more highly contested. The hitherto more central, and in our view crucial role of the teaching profession in helping to shape as well as implement policy has been diluted. Complex educational issues have been submerged in wider political debates and have not received the depth of exploration or challenge that they deserve. We therefore believe that governance changes should re-create necessary distance between legitimate but wider political considerations and the forums within which complex issues can be examined. Ultimately, accountability must of course rest with parliament and government, but decision making would benefit from the creation of established mechanisms for anticipating and testing complex educational questions within a new accountability framework.

In addition to better decision making about the strategic direction of Scottish education, we also need to develop much more efficient approaches to change management. *Making Sense of Educational Reform: Where Next for Scottish Education?* published by ADES³ in 2019 made the case for creating a less hierarchical, more egalitarian self-improving system. However, despite some progress, for example in some of the work of RICs⁴, there has been little evidence to suggest that the system is progressing in this direction with any pace. Rather, decision-making continues to be over centralised, with for example, centrally imposed targets (stretch aims) to achieve the ‘delivery chain’, as seen in Michal Barber’s approach to ‘deliverology’ in Westminster during the late 90s and early to mid 2000s. This is an outmoded deficit model of change and innovation and certainly not fit for Scotland in 2023.

In terms of transparency, accountability and evidence of performance, Barber’s view may be seductive to both policymakers and politicians. However, it was also crude, in that it tended to

ignore the complexity of the relationship between capability, culture, context and community. There is a growing body of evidence that change processes that encourage engagement and a shift in ownership towards those responsible for implementation rather than compliance are more likely to lead to real and more sustained change.

Muir’s review, *Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education* (2022), potentially reflects much of the above thinking. The challenge is to create structures that support good decision making that is focused on Scotland’s learners receiving education of the highest quality. The key decisions about the actual experience of learners are taken by teachers on a minute-by-minute basis. The prime task, therefore, is to ensure that our teachers are informed and supported in making the decisions that best serve their students. This means continually enhancing their professional expertise and creating the conditions for this expertise to be deployed to the full. We need supportive structures that make teaching a reflective and research-informed process. Governance, leadership, and accountability mechanisms should all be consistent with this principle.

A trend towards broadening the base of those involved in teaching and learning was already evident pre-pandemic. However, the pandemic created the need to continue to provide learning to young people while the buildings themselves were closed. At the same time, access to formal instruction through technological routes is increasingly available. The challenge for schools and teachers is to build on such developments to enrich the learning opportunities available to learners. For example, ‘flipped-classroom’ approaches where students are guided to sources of learning not dependent on the physical presence of a teacher are likely to grow. The challenge for the profession is to provide contexts for exploring and reinforcing such learning during the school day. That points to the need for teachers to focus more on stimulating and encouraging learning and on creating opportunities for applying learning individually and in groups, indoors and out. It will also assist teachers in providing more individual attention to learners experiencing difficulty.

TSF⁵ anticipated this kind of development by emphasising the need to support teachers to grow and develop throughout careers that are likely to involve significant changes in roles over time. Whist the aspirations of TSF still hold true, TSF’s failure was in implementation. There is an urgent need to revisit the recommendations of TSF, including an enhanced role for universities to help build networks that build capacity within and across different sectors. This will require a shift in thinking and a willingness to collaborate within and between stakeholder groups.

The analysis that we set out above reflects our understanding of research and of our experiences both home and abroad. But what might be done in practice? What might this look like on the ground and ultimately: what are schools for? who do we need? how do we do it? We consider that there six key principles that underpin these questions:

- (Creating shared) Values, vision, and purpose
- (Understanding) Context, capacity, and culture
- (Using) Evidence to inform the strategy
- (Securing) Confidence, credibility and leadership
- (Facilitating) Implementation and innovation
- (Building) Coherence and sustainability

Taking each of these principles in turn.

Firstly, the system needs to develop a shared understanding that unites the players across the system. The National Discussion is a part of this and can play a key role. However, the test of its success will be the extent to which it has secured broad involvement and helps to establish a clear strategic direction for the future. It should not be a one-off event but the start of a process within which complex questions are identified and aired as a normal part of the governance of, and debate within Scottish education.

Secondly, we need to have an accurate understanding and analysis of the context, capacity, and culture at the local level. This requires secure data and authentic partnership working between institutions: locally, regionally, and nationally. All actors must build productive relationships underpinned by mutual trust and respect rather than rely on traditional ways of working that are too reliant on conceptions of power and position.

³Association of Directors of Education Scotland
⁴Regional Improvement Collaboratives

⁵Teaching Scotland’s Future

Thirdly, it is vital that reform is grounded in evidence about current strengths and weaknesses and about what is most likely to achieve intended aims. The values, vision and purpose that underpin the strategy must ‘fit’ with the context and capacity and not be too far removed from the existing culture of the system. Current approaches provide only fragmentary sources of evidence. Independent empirical research in Scottish education is far too limited and fails to sufficiently inform decision making. Inspection, which represents an important source of evidence, has in Scotland lost much of its utility. Inspections are too infrequent, insufficiently independent, and rapidly becoming outmoded in their approach. We need a much more strategic approach to evidence gathering encompassing both inspection and research and drawing wherever possible on relevant international insights and comparisons.

Fourthly, we need to generate and sustain confidence and credibility. This is needed at both an individual and collective level. To shift cultures, we will need to be bold and have the confidence to take risks and do things differently. Inevitably, this will lead to some things that work very well and others not so well. For the things that don’t go so well it is important that they do not to undermine confidence and credibility. This means we will have to be agile and flexible and use evidence to inform where we invest and disinvest our energy and resources.

We need leadership that is flexible and can facilitate cultural change. We need to create a culture that combines impact with necessary creativity and innovation. Such an approach to leadership needs to be modelled at all levels of decision making, including government and national and local officials. We must be bold and imaginative rather than maintaining the status quo or ‘moving the deckchairs’ around the system. We need to refocus investment on leadership development in ways that can both strengthen the cadre of existing leaders and accelerate the progress of our future leaders.

New forms of leadership need to move beyond reinforcing the hierarchies of the past, towards a system that works through networks and adheres to the principles of subsidiarity. Leadership can only

succeed through inspiring and supporting all staff to have high expectations and investing in professional development that ensures that learners have access to teaching and learning of the highest quality.

New arrangements must create a context and mechanisms for cultural change that promote subsidiarity and place decision-making and support for improvement closer to the ‘classroom’; a call made by the initial review undertaken by the OECD, some seven years ago in 2015.

Fifthly, we need to develop a realisation strategy that engages the profession. This means that the profession must be more than consulted about the reforms. The profession must be involved and share ownership of the change rather than perceive change to be a centrally driven burden that is externally imposed. Furthermore, and relating to the fourth point, the profession must be given the space and confidence to innovate without fear of sanction. That is not to say that accountability is not important. It is vital that (a) we can identify failures quickly and (b) have the ability to implement changes that put us back on course. Accountability should be intelligent and foster joint responsibility for decision-making. Fear is a poor basis for sustained and real improvement in learning and teaching.

Sixthly, and finally the reforms should take the opportunity to build coherence and plan for sustainability. Coherence within the system is crucial to avoid fractures and tensions that will lead to washback and various forms of unintended outcomes. Internal coherence within the education system is a necessary but insufficient ingredient for success. We need to ensure that the educational system articulates and coheres with other public services, the third and private sectors. At a time of ever diminishing resources, it is important that we avoid duplication, achieve economies of scale by taking a holistic approach to learners’ education. The reforms will need to be sustainable in terms of the new structures and processes put in place; in terms of the cultures that they promote; in terms of the resources available to support them in the medium and long term; and in terms of the environment.



Final thoughts

As we noted at the beginning of this paper, Scotland’s educational system is at a crossroads. It can batten-down the hatches and continue broadly on its current path, ignoring the commentaries and evidence from outsiders and practitioners alike. Perhaps understandably, the after-effects of the pandemic and the current economic climate might make consolidation or even retrenchment seem attractive. However, that same environment underpins the need for longer-term thinking. We believe that Scottish education should rise to the challenge and take the opportunity presented by the plethora of reviews and the National Discussion to establish a long-term strategic vision for our young people’s learning and wellbeing. As we have argued

in this paper, leadership is key, and the strategic vision must be underpinned by the principle of subsidiarity combined with investment in professional capacity and building a transparent evidence-based culture where innovation, creativity, responsiveness, and flexibility become the norm.

We need a period of bold thinking and calculated risk taking if we are to build a culture that will be willing, where necessary, to challenge current orthodoxies and generate new ways of working. We need to create the education system that all of Scotland’s learners deserve. It remains to be seen if Government and the profession are willing to rise to the challenge and seize this opportunity?



Contacts:

chris.chapman@glasgow.ac.uk
graham.donaldson@glasgow.ac.uk

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